The Role of the Rehabilitation Counselor in Transitioning Youth with Disabilities to Postsecondary Education and Employment

Statement of the Problem

Business leaders across the country are clamoring for highly skilled workers in all industries to fill the large voids left by the retirement of the boomer generation and to meet the increased demands of a technological global economy. The U.S. Department of Education in their Strategic Plan of 1998-2000 has reported that postsecondary education is the entryway to professional and technical training and higher wages. Thus, in order for the U.S. to sustain the economy and remain competitive in the world market, it is imperative that young adults pursue some form of education and training beyond high school in order to meet the present workforce demands and to achieve economic independence. This means that postsecondary institutions are faced with the challenge of finding ways to successfully educate all youth including those with special needs.

According to Blackorby and Wagner (1996) youth with disabilities are pursuing postsecondary education in greater numbers climbing from 2.6% in 1978, to 9.4% in 1995, to nearly 19% in 1996. In spite of the fact that students with disabilities have increased access to higher education they have met with limited success in community college programs, resulting in poor employment outcomes (Stodden, 2000). In an article on postsecondary education and students with disabilities, Burgstahler, Crawford, and Acosta (2000) report that only 25% of students with disabilities who have entered community colleges have earned an Associates Degree after five years. In a survey conducted by the National Organization on Disability (1998) only 29% of persons with disabilities, ages 18-64 works full or part-time. This statistic becomes even more alarming when considered in relation to the estimated size of the U.S. population of persons with disabilities, i.e., 10% of the population or approximately 28 million people (NOD, 1998). Given the present vacancies in the workforce and the projected future needs, it is critical that persons with disabilities enter and be able to succeed in postsecondary education and training in
order to access high-skilled jobs and compete in the workforce.

Therefore, there is a compelling need for strong transition programs and practices to address the issues of postsecondary education and services for youth with disabilities. In the 1997 version of IDEA, the definition of “transition services” is very similar to the definition found in the Rehabilitation Act of 1992. According to Kohler (1998) the intent of aligning these two laws was to remove the barriers to school/agency collaboration and facilitate a coordinated transition from school to postschool services and clear the way for the early involvement of Rehabilitation Counselors with high school students with disabilities. The active involvement of Rehabilitation Counselors in transition planning is crucial in assisting students with disabilities in identifying postschool goals and objectives, and the supports necessary to achieve them. The collaboration and coordination at the interagency systems level is critical (Kohler, 1998). In view of these changes in IDEA promoting the early involvement of Rehabilitation Counselors in providing transition services to high school students with disabilities for postsecondary education and employment, many questions arise regarding their role within both of these educational settings. Additional questions surface regarding the types of services and supports necessary for students with disabilities to experience success in postsecondary education and the workplace.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of the relationship between Rehabilitation Counselors and high school special education teachers/transition specialists in transitioning youth with disabilities into postsecondary education?

2. According to rehabilitation counselors, special education teachers/transition specialists and students with disabilities, what is the role of the rehabilitation counselors in transitioning students to postsecondary settings?

3. What support services do students with disabilities believe are necessary to succeed in postsecondary education?

4. How does a rehabilitation counselor support students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education?

5. What is the role of an effective Rehabilitation Counselor in facilitating students with disabilities access to employment after completion of postsecondary education?

Research Methods

The purpose of this qualitative project is to develop a case study of best practices of Rehabilitation Counselors, who have successfully transitioned youth with disabilities through postsecondary education to employment. One way of defining a successful transition from high school to adult life for students with disabilities is the completion of postsecondary education/training and subsequent employment. In the field of rehabilitation the number of clients that become employed determines a counselor’s success.

While the legal mandates (IDEA 1997 and ADA 1992) specify that agency counselors are to provide transition services for youth with disabilities in high school through postsecondary education, little is known
about the complexity and processes involved in providing these services. There are several human relationships involved in providing these services. This study is interested in the relationships between the rehabilitation counselor and the special education teacher or transition specialist and the relationship between the counselor and the student with the disability. The intent of this project is to examine the experiences of the people involved in successful transitions from high school to postsecondary education and/or training to employment and to provide the professionals and “clients” engaged in this process a case study of the best practices.

The qualitative method is interactive and therefore better able to provide insights into the complexities and processes involved in providing transition services (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Since the transition planning and the implementation of transition services is process-oriented, a qualitative approach will enable the researcher to look at the context and the players from a holistic perspective without reducing them to variables and view them and the process as a whole (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Further, the qualitative method may be more effective when used to identify the links and the correlations that exist within and between groups rather than causations (Geertz, 1973).

The case study method is most appropriate for this study because the research questions are more explanatory in nature and the explanations will link the transition services and supports with the effects of postsecondary/training and employment. These research questions are being asked about a contemporary set of events, i.e., the transition process, and the role of the rehabilitation counselor in supporting this process, over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 1994). According to Borg and Gall, (1989) a qualitative inquiry methodology is appropriate when attempting to understand what is happening in a field, in this case the rehabilitation field and transition services. It also provides information about what the happenings (the counselors' interactions and services) mean to the people involved in the process, primarily students with disabilities and special education teachers/transition specialists.

There are three important guidelines for qualitative research that govern the value and usefulness of this type of study: credibility, dependability, and transferability (Guba, 1981). Credibility refers to the congruence between the intended meanings of the participants and those meanings interpreted and represented by the researchers. This study’s credibility is increased by having multiple researchers read and analyze the data, then by having them meet and discuss the data and come to a consensus on the interpretations. An additional check on the interpretation of the data is the added step of having the participants included in the initial phases of the analysis. "Crucial to inter-reliability is inter-rater or inter-observer reliability--the extent to which the sets of meanings held by multiple observers are sufficiently congruent so that they describe the phenomena in the same way and arrive at the same conclusions about them" (LeCompte and Goetz, p.41).

Dependability involves maintaining stability and consistency while allowing for an emergent study design. This project's dependability is strengthened through the use of multiple researcher
verification and by recording and transcribing the interviews. Further, Lincoln and Guba (1985) also recommend triangulation of data as a way to build the credibility and validity of data. Triangulation of data involves collecting multiple sets of data of events to develop accurate representations that can be compared and contrasted for corroboration. Hence, this study will conduct multiple interviews to examine the role of the rehabilitation counselor in providing transition services to youth with disabilities and the nature of the relationships between and among the participants in the process. The key participants in the transition process (rehabilitation counselors, special education teachers/transition specialists, and students with disabilities) will be interviewed separately about their experiences in the transition process. Each participant’s recorded experience will be used to corroborate the role of the Rehabilitation Counselor, the nature of the relationships in the process, and the supports necessary for successful transition of students with disabilities through postsecondary education/training to employment. It is believed that these measures to ensure credibility and dependability diminish the drawbacks often cited about case study methods namely that there is a perceived lack of rigor because the researcher, who is also the instrument of research may allow "equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the direction of findings and conclusions" (Yin, 1994, p.9.)

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the results, whether they will be applicable to another situation. Since all rehabilitation agencies are now required to offer services and supports to youth with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education and employment, a case study describing the best practices of a Rehabilitation Counselor will be of interest to all rehabilitation agencies interested in improving the practice of their counselors and the transition services they provide for youth with disabilities. In addition, since the tri-county area of the study consists of urban, suburban, and rural school districts, the majority of counselors, special educators, and administrators involved in the transition process in other parts of Michigan and the United States will be able to relate to this case study.

Design of the Study
In order to gain a more holistic understanding of providing transition services to youth with disabilities the perceptions and experiences of the key players in this process and the dynamics of these relationships need to be investigated. This study is designed to take an in depth look at the role of a Rehabilitation Counselor and the nature of these relationships through a careful examination of the counseling practice of 4 Rehabilitation Counselors.

Site Selection: Four Rehabilitation Counselors designated to provide transition services to youth with disabilities in 36 school districts encompassing urban, suburban and rural settings in a tri-county area in Michigan have been identified as subjects for this study. The intent was to identify a site that would be enough of a cross section of school districts in various settings, so that the results of the study would be more readily transferable.

Sampling Procedures/Recruitment: There are only 4 counselors designated by the tri-county rehabilitation office to
provide transition services to youth with disabilities. Thus the sampling size for this study is 100%. All 4 of the counselors have been recruited and have agreed to participate in the study. Each of the 4 Counselors will identify 3 students with disabilities on their case list that have completed postsecondary education/training and are now employed for a total number of 12 students. Every attempt will be made to identify nearly equal numbers of male and female students with various disabilities (learning, emotional, physical, sensory etc.) schooled in urban, suburban, and rural settings, and as ethnically diverse as possible. Since the goal is to find students who have completed postsecondary education/training and are employed, it should be noted that it might not be possible to have equal representation along each of these dimensions. Additionally, all of the 36 school districts in this tri-county area are at various stages of implementation in providing transition planning and programs, effecting the number and range of the sample. The special education teachers/transition specialists interviewed for the project will be the primary case managers who were responsible for these students' transition planning while in high school. Every effort will be made to select a sample of students and teachers/transition specialists that reflect the range of participants and settings within the tri-county area, so that people outside of the sample will be able to relate to the experiences of those in the study (Patton, 1989).

**Data Collection:** The data sources for this study will be Rehabilitation Counselors, the special education teachers/transition specialists, and the students with disabilities.

Four Rehabilitation Counselors will be interviewed separately about their role in the transition process and the supports/services they provided in transitioning 3 youth with disabilities on their caseload from high school through postsecondary education/training to employment. This will result in 12 total interviews with the 4 Rehabilitation Counselors. In addition, Counselors will provide information on their interactions with the high school special education teachers/transition specialists responsible for transitioning these 12 students to postsecondary education/training.

The special education teachers or transition specialist, who served as the primary case manager for the 12 students with disabilities identified for this study, will also be interviewed individually about the transition process with these students and the role of the Rehabilitation Counselor. It is estimated that approximately 6-12 special education teachers/transition specialists will be interviewed, as some may have been the service provider for more than one of the students identified in the study.

The 12 students with disabilities (3 from each counselor) will be interviewed about the role of their Rehabilitation Counselor in transitioning them through postsecondary education/training to employment and the supports they believe have been necessary for their success.

The research method will be an in-depth interview developed for each of the players in the transition process: Rehabilitation Counselors, special education teachers/transition specialists and students with disabilities served by these professionals. The interviews will consist of 10-12 questions. Five to 6 of
the questions will be common questions asked of all three subjects about the role of the rehabilitation counselor and the nature of their relationships in the transition process. The remaining 5 to 6 questions will be tailored to the individual on specific issues related to their part in the transition process. For example, rehabilitation counselors will be asked about the specific supports and services they provided the 3 individual students with disabilities on their caseload and these students will be asked what supports/services they believed were necessary to succeed in postsecondary education/training.

In-depth interviewing is a method selected for this study as it is one of the best ways to discern peoples’ perceptions towards various events in a process, and to compare and contrast their unique interpretations of the roles and relationships of the participants and the effects or outcomes of the process (Patton, 1989).

**Data Analysis Procedures:** All of the interviews will be audio taped and transcribed. A team of three researchers will analyze the data. For the first level of analysis one researcher on the team will read each of the transcriptions and summarize the content of the interviews. Then, the other two researchers on the team will read the interviews and initial summaries and revise the summaries, if necessary. The research team will meet and work together to develop a final summary. These summaries will be shared with the participants in the study for verification and corroboration of the content of their interviews. Any changes in the content of the summaries will be discussed with the participant and noted.

Since the essential raw data of interviews are quotations and first hand experiences, the second level of analysis will involve examining the content of the interviews to determine what issues or behaviors surface most frequently regarding the role of the rehabilitation counselor for most participants. Quotations and key words will be grouped and catalogued according to the main topics and issues that emerge in this case related to the role of the Rehabilitation Counselors, the nature of the relationships, and the transition supports and services and other major topics that are unanticipated (Seidman, 1991, p.12.). The research team will work together to develop common categories from their analyses. These categories will then be analyzed by the researchers to identify patterns and redundancies in the categories related to the role of the Rehabilitation Counselor, the nature of the relationships, and the necessary supports and services and other unanticipated topics. The researchers will meet to verify and corroborate the analysis of their categories and work together to generate the final results.

The final results from the data will be analyzed and presented as a case study of the best practices of Rehabilitation Counselors in providing transition services to students with disabilities as they transition from high school to postsecondary education/training to employment. The case study will include descriptions of the nature of the relationships among the players in the transition process, the role of an effective rehabilitation counselor, and the supports and services students with disabilities believe necessary for success in postsecondary education/training and in accessing employment. More than one case study may emerge from this data,
such as examples of students with disabilities and their experiences in transitioning through postsecondary education to employment.

**Reporting the Results**

The findings of this study will be reported in the form of case studies of best practices. One case study will be on the Rehabilitation Counselors and their role in providing transition services and the nature of the human relationships in the transition process. Other case studies on the 12 students with disabilities who have successfully transitioned from high school to postsecondary education to employment may be possible to develop. Further, case studies of special education teachers/transition specialists and the role they play in facilitating the transition planning process in the high school setting may emerge as well.

A series of papers on the supports and services necessary for students with disabilities to succeed in postsecondary education to employment and the nature of the relationships between rehabilitation counselors, special education teachers, transition specialists, and students with disabilities in the transition process will be explored.

The targeted audiences for this research are special education teachers, Rehabilitation Counselors, postsecondary disabilities counselors, transition specialists, special education directors, rehabilitation agency administrators, policymakers, and parents of youth with disabilities. Findings will be published in various journals and available on the websites of the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports.

**Implications for Training**

This study has implications for universities involved in training pre-service special education teachers, transition specialists, special education administrators, and rehabilitation counselors. It has further implications for the continuing professional development of veterans in the fields of special education, rehabilitation, counseling and special education administration. The study may well illuminate areas for change within the service agencies (rehabilitation and mental health) responsible for transitioning people with disabilities into employment.

**References**


Kohler, P. (1998), Chapter 8


Published in the National Review Forum Briefing Materials, March 9-10, 2000, Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Support, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, University of Hawaii.


### WORK PLANNING DOCUMENT FOR PHASE II STUDY PROPOSALS

#### YEAR 1

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<th>TASK TO BE COMPLETE</th>
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<th>TIMELINE</th>
<th>PRODUCT/OUTCOME</th>
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<td><strong>Development and Approval of Study Brief</strong></td>
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<td>Develop study proposal</td>
<td>Lamb</td>
<td>April 1, 2001</td>
<td>Proposal Accepted</td>
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<td><strong>Set-up of Study Design &amp; Method</strong></td>
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| 1. Identify participants: Rehabilitation counselors, students, special ed teachers  
2. Develop Interviews for Rehab Counselors, Students, Special ed teachers | Lamb/Project Staff |  | Participants for study identified |
| **Conduct of the Study (describe plan for pilot, implementation, & replication)** |  |  |  |
| Interview Project participants | Lamb/Project Staff | October 2001-April 2002 | Interviews conducted/data collection completed. |
| **Analysis of Data or Information** |  |  |  |
| Analyze interview data from project participants and develop preliminary case studies and framework for research papers. | Lamb/Project Staff | May 2002 - October 2002 | Data Analysis completed and framework for case studies and outline for research papers completed. |
| **Development of Products & Reports** |  |  |  |
| Develop Case studies and papers on project outcomes | Lamb/Project staff | October 2002 - January 2003 | Submit case study and paper/s for publication and dissemination. |
| **Conduct of Training, TA, & Dissemination** |  |  |  |
| Dissemination results through presentation at state and national conferences (Pacific | Lamb/Project staff | January 2003 - Ongoing | Disseminate project outcomes through written case study and research papers through |
Rim, CEC, DCDT, AHEAD etc.) and written materials. state and national conferences. Share results with state officials at Michigan Rehabilitation Services and determine possibilities for statewide training.

| Projected Costs (funded by the RRRTC, leveraged from NSF Bridges Project) | Lamb/Project Staff | Ongoing - January 2003 | Project budget |